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One Hope of Vietnamese Children's Theatre

Although the advancement of media and technology helps Vietnamese people engage with pop culture and access digital entertainment such as the YouTube platform and computer games, many forms of performing arts in Vietnam are under threat today. Theatre has become less meaningful to younger generations, and many theatres have been closed because of a lack of public interest and financial support. In fact, at the moment, *Institut d'Echanges Culturels avec la France* (IDECAF) is the only children theatre in Vietnam that has survived after nearly 30 years of establishment. Over the past few decades, Vietnam seems to have been left one children's drama series, *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* (*Once Upon A Time*), organized by IDECAF. When it first began, *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* was able to produce two plays annually in summer and mid-autumn, lately it can only deliver one play per year due to the reduced interest of young audiences (Hoang). However, in general, *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* still stands out in Vietnamese society and attracts public attention compared to other artforms. This research paper will analyze the importance of *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* in the technological era. This topic is significant and should be studied because it offers a firm hope for Vietnamese theatre and arts and serves to remind Vietnamese people to preserve its traditional treasure. The spoken drama *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* not only serves as a means of entertainment, but it also teaches Vietnamese moral and historical values. Moreover, if the Vietnamese government and younger generations take serious action to revive the degradation of theatre, performing arts can play a vital role in international collaboration, political economy, and cultural identity.

Over the last twenty years, *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* has produced thirty-two plays including *Đế Mèn Phiêu Lưu Ký* (*Adventures of A Cricket*), *Aladdin và Đủ Thứ Thần* (*Aladdin and All Kinds of God*), and *AnLy và Thần Băng Giá* (*AnLy and The Frozen God*). The first play, *Tám Cám* (*The*

Story of Tam and Cam), was performed at Bến Thành Theatre on World Children's Day in 2000. At that time, Vietnamese children did not have many options for entertainment, except for traditional folk games or television. Being one of the first musical dramas in Vietnam, *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* gained enormous popularity in society by telling folk tales from Vietnam and all over the world. Although many types of performing arts are in a recession, the spoken drama *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* remains an indispensable part of many Vietnamese children's lives. In the article "The Palimpsest of Vietnamese Contemporary Spoken Drama" published in the *Theatre Research International* in 2005, Catherine Diamond analyzes reasons why spoken drama, which was once considered as "Asia's non-popular theatre," can find its place in the modern world. In 1921, spoken drama was first introduced in Hanoi Grand Theatre with the play *A Cup of Poison* (*Chén Thuốc Độc*) written by Vu Dinh Long as a kind of entertainment for the French colonial empire (Diamond, 209). Spoken drama quickly became popular during the 1920s and currently, although technology and other entertainment platforms are becoming more dominant, both actors and directors of spoken drama still have hectic schedules as a result of the continual demand (207). Spoken drama blends traditional elements such as "Sino-Vietnamese, French classical, American realist, and Soviet Formalist concepts" to represent current issues (208).

Many types of performing arts have vanished, not solely because of the change in people's preferences, but in the case of theatre because it cannot link its plays to contemporary society. Diamond states that the job of theatre is not to inform the public of news, but rather "provide[s] them with a commentary on what they read in the papers, and allows them the intellectual space to contemplate their society" (220). Spoken drama employs realism, which depicts layers of influence and realistic representation of the modern Vietnamese lifestyle (210). Furthermore, what makes Vietnamese spoken drama valuable is its focus on the Vietnamese language and

population. Many other Asian theatres are diminishing because they spend most of their time and effort “[catering] to an international market” (212). Specifically, even though *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* adapts many plays from other countries such as *Cô Bé Lọ Lem* (*Cinderella*) or *Người Đẹp và Quái Vật* (*Beauty and The Beast*) and implements European staging and techniques, it still possesses its unique style and approaches that match the interest of the Vietnamese community. Many of the best-spoken drama plays run for years because they offer “entertainment and an appropriate moral message” (220). This characteristic satisfies theorist Horace’s Rule of the Theatre, that drama should both entertain and teach an audience.

In *Ars Poetica* (*Art of Poetry*), Horace repeatedly emphasizes that poetry (or theatre) should both “instruct and delight” to contribute a great value to society. This injunction creates a firm standard for every aspect of *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* performances. Although *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* mainly tells traditional folk stories, IDECAF carefully implements modern elements in the stage settings, props, and costumes to attract young theatre-goers. Besides, each play contains more than ten songs borrowed from other countries or originally composed by IDECAF, so the actors can deliver their dialogues and messages through fascinating rhythms and dance moves. With hundreds of colorful clothing, sophisticated stage decorations, and creative music, *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* successfully set up animated performances that please the young audience. Parents take their children to watch *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* not only because it is relaxing and entertaining, but also because it professionally integrates the lessons of morality and history into every show.

Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa teaches the audience by using Vietnamese traditional elements of theatre such as *chèo*, *cải lương*, and *ca trù* in its plays. The "Forgiving Thi Mau, a Girl Who Dared to Defy: Performance Change and *Chèo* Theatre in Northern Vietnam" article argues that an art

form, specifically *chèò* in Vietnam, can reflect one nation's shifting social attitudes and viewpoints over the course of its development. *Chèo* is a form of satirical musical theatre, traditionally performed in northern Vietnam. By comparing the village or "classical" *chèò* and professionally staged *chèò*, Lauren Meeker emphasizes the significance of *chèò* in Vietnamese society (Meeker 138). Because *chèò* acts as a "Morality Education" in Vietnam, people can understand the deep roots of Vietnamese moral values and principles just by watching performances (141). This article brings up an example of the character Thị Mầu to illustrate the shift in the Vietnamese judgment of female virtues. While in the past, Thị Mầu's act of flirting with a monk was viewed as sinful, today people think Thị Mầu is just "'a rebel' who loved the one she wanted to marry" (150). The acceptance of women in a broader range of "women's sexuality and equality" are incorporated into today's *chèò* performances to raise awareness of young audiences (151). Back to *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa*, in the play *Huyền Thoại Nữ Thần Lee Kim Chi* (*Lee Kim Chi Goddess Legend*), IDECAF implements *chèò* music to tell the story of Mother Lee Kim Chi who exchanges her beautiful appearance with a demon to protect her children. Combined with the traditional musical theatre, *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* makes a great contribution to preserve classic fairy tales and teach children values of humanity like maternal love.

Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa also incorporates *cải lương*, Vietnamese "reformed opera," and *ca trù*, Vietnamese genre of musical storytelling, teach audience history. In the article "Personal Sorrow: Cai Luong and the Politics of North and South Vietnam" published in *Asian Theatre Journal* in 2012, Khai Thu Nguyen declares because *cải lương* "bears the imprints of multiple colonialisms that have occurred in Vietnam's history," its patterns and content have multiple layers of French, American, and Chinese cultural values that significantly shape Vietnam's national identity (Nguyen 257). Nguyen states that because *cải lương* has existed in Vietnamese culture for a long

time since the south and north were divided into two separate polities, *cải lương* always reminds people of the past politics and “builds the emotions of the audience to great heights” when it is performed (273). Another significant musical form in *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* is *ca trù*. In the article "Singing the Past: Vietnamese Ca Tru, Memory, and Mode" published in *Asian Music* in 2005, Barley Norton introduces *ca trù* as a means of connection between past and current generations. *Ca trù* is considered as a “‘refined’ (thanh nhã) and ‘scholarly’ (bác học) genre with a long history,” starting from the Ly dynasty 1009-1225 (Norton 30). With a distinguished history, *ca trù* means a lot to the Vietnamese elderly as “it recalls personal memories of listening to *ca trù* in their youth, of youthful romance, and of a bygone Vietnam” (48). Although *cải lương* and *ca trù* is not well-appreciated in Vietnamese contemporary society, *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* blends the two traditional musical genres into many of its plays to give today’s children a realistic picture of their parents’ and grandparents’ former life as well as help the prior generations revitalize their childhood memories. For instance, in the play *Lá Cờ Thêu Sáu Chữ Vàng* (*Six Golden Letters Embroidery Flag*), *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* tells the story of Vietnamese hero Trần Quốc Toàn who sacrificed himself for Vietnam in the second war against the Mongol invasion. By using musical elements of *cải lương* and *ca trù*, *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* truthfully portrays the historical events and characters to teach the young audience about the proud history of Vietnam.

However, one of the biggest disadvantages of *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* is that it has not reached its fullest potential of expanding its audience to a global scale. Today, only water puppetry can reach out to the world and represent Vietnamese traditional values. In the article “The Metonymy of Art: Vietnamese Puppetry As a Representation of Modern Vietnam” published in 2001 in *The Drama Review*, Kathy Foley closely examines the heritage and artistic values of traditional stage

water puppetry to further understand its impact as a signature trademark of Vietnam. Vietnamese water puppetry first appeared in 1121 C.E. “at a birthday celebration of King Ly Nhan Ton of the Ly Tran era (1010-1400 C.E.)” (Foley 131). Beginning in the 1950s, because “village arts [were] supported by the new government” and “intercultural exchange between Vietnam and Eastern Europe” was fostered, Vietnamese water puppetry soon absorbed the international elements of arts and became an icon “of the whole nation-state” (134). Furthermore, in 1956, Ho Chi Minh, former Prime Minister of Vietnam, selected puppetry as “an important educational tool for children” (134). Vietnamese water puppetry soon developed into a phenomenon in Southeast Asia and brought Vietnam’s image to the world. What makes Vietnamese water puppetry stand out in global art movements and styles are the themes and stories behind each performance. Most performance settings are village-based, and the performers typically tell the stories of wars in Vietnam history to encourage national unity and patriotism as well as remind foreigners of Vietnam’s victory over powerful empires (138). Foley concludes that Vietnamese water puppetry has become a representation of its culture and history and makes Vietnam known around the globe: “what represented a few villages now speaks to and for the whole world” (139).

Moreover, in the article "Intercultural Theatre and Community in Southeast Asia: The ASEAN Puppet Exchange in Jakarta" published in 2018 in the *Asian Theatre Journal*, Jennifer Goodlander proves that water puppetry has fostered healthy relationships in the art network through the Water of ASEAN event. With the motto “One Vision, One Identity, One Community,” ASEAN fosters strong relationships among Southeast Asian nations in multiple ways. One of its prominent cultural exchanges is the appearance of the Water of ASEAN event which was organized by The ASEAN Puppet Exchange (APEX) in 2016 to celebrate the 48th ASEAN anniversary (Goodlander 27). Each country had to contribute one puppetry art form, and

Vietnam presented its famous water puppetry in the joint performance (31). Despite the difficulties in understanding each country's language and history, participating members were still able to work collectively to create a massive performance as "their cultures and history are connected through water" (44). Arts and stories bring people together as they find "unity in diversity" (39). Through puppetry stories on stage, the audience can learn Vietnamese culture and history. Thanks to the opportunity, Vietnam can enter the global market with its unique water puppetry as countries "learn from each other [in ways] that will strengthen art and culture for the entire region" (47). No less than water puppetry, the spoken drama *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* has enough potential to promote itself to the world. With professional and dedicated artists involved, interesting stories to tell, and beautifully designed stage settings, *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* can reach out to the international market and serve as a representation for Vietnamese children's means of education and entertainment if the government gives strong support.

Unfortunately, the Vietnamese government is providing less funding to cultural activities, and intellectual property rights in Vietnam is weakened. In the article "Economic Reforms, Cultural Policy: Opportunities and Challenges to the Arts and Culture in Vietnam in the Age of Globalization" published in the *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* in 2008, Huong Le analyzes the current problem of depreciating performing arts in Vietnam. Le does not deny the new opportunities that the modern world has brought to Vietnamese theatres such as the emergence of art galleries and the impacts that "positively motivate organizations and create a competitive climate" (Le 14). However, she feels that the drawbacks outweigh the benefits. From 1945 to 1986, the Vietnamese government and The Ministry of Culture and Information provided many subsidies and support to local arts and cultural organizations (9). Therefore, traditional performing arts prospered and played a major role in Vietnamese people's lives at that time.

However, after the “Doi Moi” reform policy was introduced to Vietnam in 1986, the government cut off funding for theatres because “cultural sectors were regarded as nonproductive or nonprofit areas” (10). Theatre artists struggle to make a living from their arts and uphold the standard theatre quality. According to research, the number of professional performing arts organizations quickly dropped from 191 to 135 between 1996 and 2000 (12). In addition, there are many issues in intellectual property rights in Vietnam. Annette Van den Bosch discusses multiple problems with the Vietnamese legal situation in her article "Professional Artists in Vietnam: Intellectual Property Rights, Economic, and Cultural Sustainability" published in *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* in 2009. She believes Vietnamese arts and theatre deteriorates because of “the systemic failure to support IP rights” (Van den Bosch 225). Because “Vietnamese artists have limited rights and opportunities to legally enforce contracts,” they do not have an incentive to develop the arts (228). Many fakes and copies appear in the market because “Vietnam’s legal documentation on IP protection is confusing and needs strengthening” (226). The government should be responsible for the current struggles of Vietnamese theatres. Vietnam needs to establish proper funding policies, provide pieces of training for arts executives, and allow wider arts topics for audience expansion. If the government does not take meaningful actions in the market-oriented economy, performing arts, including the drama series *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa*, may quickly disappear from the future life.

In my original research, I will conduct interviews and surveys that ask Vietnamese teenagers whether they are familiar with *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* or other performing arts to see their perceptions of theatre. Furthermore, I will visit IDECAF to investigate its popularity in today’s world by observing the number of audiences watching spoken dramas. I will also reach out to IDECAF directors and actors to learn more about their vision and preparation for *Ngày Xưa*

Ngày Xưa. About the scholarly resources, I will use "The Palimpsest of Vietnamese Contemporary Spoken Drama" article and other related journals to understand the spoken drama's origin, elements, and approach in contemporary society. Next, I will refer to some peer-reviewed articles such as "Forgiving Thi Mau, a Girl Who Dared to Defy: Performance Change and *Chèo* Theatre in Northern Vietnam" and "The Metonymy of Art" to outline the values of *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa* and how it can serve as a representation for Vietnamese popular artforms. Lastly, I will employ articles like "Economic Reforms, Cultural Policy: Opportunities and Challenges to the Arts and Culture in Vietnam in the Age of Globalization" and "Professional Artists in Vietnam: Intellectual Property Rights, Economic, and Cultural Sustainability" to analyze the current situation of Vietnamese theatre and suggest some solutions to restore the values of performing arts. This study is vital because it gives Vietnam a strong hope, which is *Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa*, that theatre can still revive if we take serious actions to fight for the values that we believe in.

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